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Swimming in the wake of change

Female members buoy Dolphin Club

From appearances, not much has changed at a weather-beaten swimming and boating club at the foot of Hyde Street since it first opened its doors on San Francisco

Bay more than a century ago. But those appearances conceal a remarkable transformation over the years at the Dolphin Club, a once-small, fraternal organization for which change has meant more than survival.

Things haven't always gone swimmingly at the Dolphin — the club had to survive that earthquake and fire, some development encroachment, several complicated moves, much bureaucratic bargaining and one memorable lawsuit — yet in good times and bad, it has managed to stay afloat.

And it's thriving today like it never has, with a hearty core of brave adventurers who willingly jump into 50-degree water about the time light first penetrates the bay's murky surface. Thin-skinned is not a trait accorded to the club's nearly 1,000 members.

This year marks a double milestone for the Bay Area's oldest swimming club (a title it earned by getting the jump on the adjoining South End Rowing Club) — the 125th anniversary of its founding, and the 25th anniversary of the day women were first allowed

in.

The bay, after all, was always an equal opportunity tormentor, and famed female swimmers like Hazel Langenour crossed the Golden Gate as early as 1911. But it would be 66 years before a discrimination lawsuit made the Dolphin and South End clubs open to all, a then-revolutionary change that today seems as dated as wool swimsuits.

"The possibility of joining when I first wanted to didn't exist," said Cindy Ehrlich, a journalist and screenwriter who discovered the club while researching a story for a now-defunct magazine called *Women Sports* in the mid-1970s. "There was always a significant number of women who swam down there, but they couldn't gain admittance to the club. There was a pretty good-sized group of older guys who felt that they were losing something."

What those men should have realized, of course, was no pain, no gain. The grumbling soon gave way to larger gatherings, better parties and improved athletic competition. The club's new open

membership status also helped it win a new lease from the city.

"Just from an athletic standpoint, the presence of women enriched the club because we got so many great swimmers," said Chris Kelly, the co-editor of the club's quarterly magazine. "Their presence made the club better over time."

Kelly said the women infused the club with a level of volunteer spirit that it had lacked — and since the club largely relies on volunteer work for repairs and renovations, it was sorely needed.

For while the Dolphin Club may be closely associated with the bay, it will never be mistaken for the Bay Club, a place where trends and fitness coincide. For years, the showers at the Dolphin could only be turned on with a pair of pliers and the dressing rooms were sandy, dark and splintered.

There have been some improvements, but the club was never about the equipment or social standing. It's a place full of free spirits — the kind who don't mind

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Swimming women buoy S.F. Dolphin Club

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diving into nerve-tingling waters or pulling themselves through an exhausting 13-mile swim, knowing that a soothing single malt awaits at the finish line.

"The club hasn't changed a whole lot over the years. It's still filled with old and rickety equipment and a hearty group of people," said city native Peggy Knickerbocker, the 21st woman to join the Dolphin. "People aren't sitting around talking about stocks and money — though the older guys do like to talk about sex."

The Dolphin Club is as much a

part of San Francisco's cultural lore as Spreckels sugar or Anchor Steam beer, though considerably more colorful. It was started in 1877 as a private club by John Wieland's family and the Kehrlein brothers, German immigrants who wanted a place for social gatherings for their friends.

The Wieland family was legendary in the city for its philanthropic largesse and the popularity of its Philadelphia Brewery, which sated the thirst of generations of Barbary Coast pub crawlers. When John Wieland died, the whole city turned out for his funeral and drank to his robust memory.

Over the years, the same type of freewheeling spirits were drawn to the club — artists and firefighters, longshoremen and attorneys. So many stories have passed through the club's watery gates that swimmer extraordinaire and 54-year member Walt Schneebeli signed on as the Dolphin Club's resident historian. Some of that history can be viewed at the club's fluid Web site, www.dolphinclub.org.

Of the original group of women Dolphins, 16 will be honored as lifetime members this year, which means that they been continuous members for 25 years. Membership, it appears, does

have its privileges.

"It's a great anniversary for the club and all that it stands for," said longtime member Nancy Friedman. "Having women members made the club a real community."

And united they swim, winter days or not, in the same bay that's been luring Dolphins for 125 years. They're still tough, and a little wild, yet eternally grateful for the wonders of electricity and indoor plumbing.

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